



Qualitative Evaluation of Youth Insearch

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Executive Summary

Background

In 2019, the Youth Insearch Foundation contracted the lead author to carry out an external evaluation of the Youth Insearch program. Our review aimed to qualitatively explore the potential benefits of the program's peer-led, group-based intervention. This report presents the findings of this evaluation.

The evaluation aimed to:

1. Explore the experiences and needs of young people participating in Youth Insearch's program.
2. Identify which aspects of the program promote change for young people.
3. Identify opportunities for revising parts of the program to better address the priorities and concerns of young people.

Evaluation Approach

The collection of information and thematic analysis started in December 2019 and occurred over a fifteen-month period. The methodology for the evaluation involved four key components:

1. Attendance and collection of ethnographic data at weekend workshops and in a support group.
2. Face-to-face interviews and a focus group with program participants.
3. Interviews with staff and adult volunteers.
4. One year follow up interviews with young people and staff who participated in the first iteration of data collection.

Findings

Inquiry into the key elements of the Youth Insearch model revealed three overarching strengths, which appear to support the effectiveness of the program, and subsequently the change possible for participants. These are:

- Foregrounding young people's strengths and wishes;
- Utilising peers as change agents; and
- Changing young people's environments.

Five 'domains' representing broad areas of personal change were identified. In practice these domains are not discrete, and the impacts or benefits that accrue from participation in Youth Insearch often sit across several inter-related domains.

1. CONNECTION: Enhancing health and wellbeing through connections with peers and adults

Friendships and connections with peers and adults
Feeling accepted and gaining a sense of belonging
A safe place to discuss grief and heal trauma

2. COMPETENCE: Developing competence, self-esteem and a sense of efficacy

Increased self-esteem, communications skills and social skills
Having a voice and being supported to use it

Recognition of skills and strengths

3. CAPABILITIES: Strengthening capacities and dispositions for learning

Enhanced learning in terms of capabilities, knowledge and life skills

Heightened skills for self-reflection and self-regulation

Increased resources and resilience

4. AGENCY: Encouraging personal agency and supporting independence

Practical and emotional support and advice

Strategies for increasing control of one's life

Fostering alternative possibilities

5. IDENTITY: (Re)inventing identity through supportive practices

Constructing productive lives

Nurturing aspirations and hopes for a better future

Moving beyond injurious self-fulfilling prophecies

Recommendations and issues for consideration

Challenging aspects and suggestions for improvements were identified. These pertain mainly to providing additional training for Leaders; enhancing processes of communication between Leaders and participants; updating the program at workshops; and developing processes for participant feedback and input.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that Youth Insearch provided a protective point of connection, a sense of belonging and much needed access to services, peers and alternative social resources. The findings further illuminate the ability of peers to present different avenues of recognition, belonging and ways of being in the world to other young people. Youth Insearch's program offers a variety of beneficial possible outcomes. These have been summarised under the interrelated domains of change namely, connection, confidence, capabilities, agency and identity. The productive conditions describe the conditions under which such change may best be supported.

Background

In 2019, the Youth Insearch Foundation contracted the lead author to carry out an external evaluation of their program. Our review aims to qualitatively explore the benefits of the program's peer-led, group-based, intervention.

The original evaluation methodology included a participatory co-operative inquiry component involving engaging a group of 6-10 young people as co-creators in a learning process. This group were to meet for reflection groups 6-8 times throughout 2020. Additionally, the group was to be trained in different qualitative techniques after which they were to engage in data collection under the supervision of Dr Moensted. An additional component involved interviews with a group of young people about their experiences at Youth Insearch between December 2019 – February 2020, who were then to be re-interviewed a year later. This would have enabled us to track any changes to the participants' lives and make an evaluation regarding the impact of participating in Youth Insearch's program, particularly the weekend workshops and weekly support groups.

The World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a pandemic on the 11th of March 2020, which involved unprecedented public health responses, including the closure of face-to-face gatherings. Covid-related restrictions included people being advised to avoid any non-essential face-to-face contact with people from outside their household, such as weekend workshops and support groups. As a consequence, Youth Insearch moved their support groups and Youth Leaders training to virtual spaces at the beginning of the pandemic. This posed several challenges for our evaluation. First and foremost, we were unable to proceed with the co-operative inquiry component as face-to-face gatherings were not feasible.

Measuring and isolating the impact of a youth program on the development of young people is never straightforward due to the variety of potential impacts on the process of personal and social development. The pandemic involved several periods of 'lockdown' and restrictions that affected participants' personal lives with many losing their jobs, their access to education and all opportunities for social and community participation. In this sense, the link between the impact of Youth Insearch and the achievement of outcomes for participants is hard to assess or demonstrate, because, for many of the participating young people, their freedoms, lifestyles and plans for their future ended abruptly in – and after – March 2020.

Despite these changes, we were able to sufficiently evaluate Youth Insearch by using a mixed-method qualitative methodology. By consulting various stakeholders (participants, Trainee and Youth Leaders, staff and volunteers), we investigated their different perspectives on what had been of value and why, what worked and what promoted change. This report presents the findings of this evaluation.

Youth Insearch Program

Established in 1985, Youth Insearch is an independent charitable organisation running youth intervention programs across New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland. The program targets young people aged 14 to 20 experiencing disadvantage and aims to help them overcome barriers, reduce individual and contextual risk factors and achieve more positive life trajectories. The program engages young people with a range of needs such as severe social and economic disadvantage, problematic family relations, bullying at school, school disengagement, isolation, mental health issues and problematic drug and alcohol use.

The program involves young people and adults in both waged and volunteer roles. Through internal leaders' training and mentoring (Douglas, Jackson, Woods, & Usher, 2019), previous program participants wishing to support other disadvantaged young people undertake training to become Youth Leaders, roles which include eventually running workshop sessions and support groups. There are currently 201 support adults (adults volunteers), 22 Trainee Leaders and 80 Youth Leaders assisting with facilitating the program.

Youth Insearch, like a majority of youth programs, aims at enabling a successful transition from young person to adult citizen. Youth Insearch employs a peer-to-peer support process to achieve this. The term 'peer-support' denotes a young person without specialised or advanced training giving freely of their time to support another young person. Youth peer-support involves the strategic use of past life events to create change processes for others, through the mechanisms of relatability, similarity, and experientially grounded, in-the-moment, support (Moensted & Buus, forthcoming). We identify a peer-support model as occurring because the program operates with an explicit and intentional focus on the relationship between the Leader(s) and the youth members as a cornerstone in the program's theory of change (Kuperminc & Thomason, 2014).

The program content was originally developed based on strongly youth-led consultations and the program continues to be youth-led. For instance, the program design is governed by the elected National and State Program Council that includes a majority of young leaders. This ensures that the program stays genuinely peer-led. Additionally, support-groups and program sessions are largely run by Youth Leaders. At the core of the program is community support, including weekly support groups, peer-to-peer support, mentoring and bi-monthly weekend workshops. In these workshops participants develop interpersonal and leadership skills through a range of activities including life skills training, group counselling and other focused activities. Weekend workshops are located away from the young people's usual settings with the aim of 'short circuiting' their problem definitions as well as their sense of possible solutions. In an earlier evaluation, the program was interpreted as analogous to a therapeutic community (Ghayour-Minaie & Toumbourou, 2016).

Evaluation Approach

The strengths of qualitative methodologies in an evaluation context include that qualitative knowledge can increase our understanding of the dynamics of Youth Insearch by highlighting what elements of the program work well or not so well. Where quantitative evaluation methodologies, such as surveys, focus on whether a program has achieved its goals, qualitative methodologies focus on *why* and *how* these goals were reached (Clarke, 1999). Such an approach allows us to document the quality of the program by describing the effects on participants, the changes experienced by participants, and understanding the process through which these changes were achieved (Green & South, 2006).

The overall aim of the present evaluation was to evaluate the effectiveness of Youth Insearch's programs. Specifically, the study aimed to:

1. Explore the experiences and needs of young people participating in Youth Insearch's program.
2. Identify which aspects of the program promote change for young people.
3. Identify opportunities for revising parts of the program to better address the priorities and concerns of young people.

Evaluation framework: Positive Youth Development

The evaluation framework employed in this report was derived by comparing the participants' experiences with literature in the field, in particular using the theoretical framework of Positive Youth Development (Heckhausen, 2007; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; Silbereisen & Lerner, 2007). Positive Youth Development is grounded in developmental systems theory and focuses on interactions between young people and their contexts, that is, how multiple resources within young people's social, emotional, physical, academic, and interpersonal environments contribute to growth, learning and thriving (Richmond, Braughton, & Borden, 2018). Positive Youth Development occurs when opportunities, activities and relationships are made available to young people in meaningful ways, allowing them to develop their unique capacities and talents (Sanders, Munford, Thimasarn-Anwar, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2015). Such an approach allows for a focus on elements promoting the generalised positive development of assets. These elements include bonding; resilience; social, emotional, cognitive, behavioural or moral competence; self-determination; positive identity; belief in the future; recognition of positive behaviour; and opportunities for pro-social involvement (Lerner et al., 2005; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). Positive Youth development proposes that the development of such assets decreases the likelihood of maladaptive behaviours, increases young people's capacity to thrive, and assists them in acquiring strengths and capabilities that will allow them to contribute to self (e.g., maintaining good health, supportive relationships, meaningful career), and to family, peers, community, and societal institutions (Lerner et al., 2005). Employing this model allowed us to explore the processes of young people's experiences and domains of change in the context of Youth Insearch.

Data collection

The collection of information and thematic analysis started in December 2019 and occurred over a fifteen-month period. The methodology for the evaluation involved four key components:

1. Ethnographic fieldwork at weekend workshops and a support group.

2. Face-to-face interviews and a focus group with program participants.
3. Interviews with staff and adult volunteers.
4. One year follow-up interviews with young people and staff who participated in the first iteration of data collection.

Data were generated from December 2019 - March 2021. Between December 2019 and March 2020, twenty-three young people and fifteen adults participated in the study. Individual interviews were conducted with 20 young people and 10 staff and volunteer adults. A focus group was run with four young people and four volunteer adults. Two young people participated in both a focus group and an interview. Four young people chose to be interviewed in pairs. Between December 2020 and March 2021 an additional 14 interviews were conducted. This included follow-up interviews with 11 of the young people from the first round of fieldwork. Two staff members and one support adult were re-interviewed as well, to gather information on the changes occurring during 2020 from the perspectives of staff and adult supports. In total, the evaluations involved the participation of 38 young program participants, Trainee Youth Leaders, Youth Leaders, staff and adult support workers.

Ethnographic fieldwork included attending two Youth Insearch weekend workshops, one near Tamworth, NSW in December 2019, and one Youth Leaders Retreat in Sydney in January 2020, as well as attendance at a support group in Wollongong in January 2020. Two researchers conducted participant observation at a weekend workshop and one (MM) conducted participant observation at a Leaders Retreat and a weekly support group. Field notes were developed (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), including scrap notes written at workshops and support groups, and extensive descriptions and theoretical/personal reflections were developed post hoc.

The interviewers and focus group used a semi-structured interview guide allowing themes to be contributed by interviewees and focus group participants. The formal interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), lasted between 45 and 120 minutes with an average length of 60 minutes. Formal interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional typist. Interviews were continually analysed during the data collection period, and the interview guide was amended according to the emergence or non-occurrence of themes. In our analysis, we were supported by having nuanced, contextual insights arising from the fieldwork taking place in the different parts of the service. A fieldwork diary was used to document all activities in the fieldwork and to develop the ongoing analyses.

Participants

Of the twenty-three young people participating, fourteen identified as female, eight identified as male and one identified as non-binary. Seventeen participants were between 16-18 years old and nine were aged between 19-24. Eight participants were Youth Leaders or Trainee Youth Leaders and the remaining fifteen were participants in the program. Nine participants identified as Indigenous Australian, twelve identified as Australian and two participants identified as Eurasian. The young people had been involved in the youth program for varying amounts of time. Nine participants had been involved in the program under 12 months, nine participants had been involved between 1-5 years, and the remaining five had been involved for over 5 years.

The young people participating in the program were confronted by a complex mix of challenges in navigating a safe pathway through adolescence. All experienced a multitude of contextual and individual risk factors evident in all domains of their lives, such as residing within families or foster homes marked by multiple social problems (such as alcohol and drug use, poverty, violence, psychiatric problems and unemployment), and few social and material resources. The young people themselves habitually struggled with a wide range of problems such as homelessness, anxiety, depression, social isolation, unemployment, and alcohol and drug misuse. Although the degree of exposure to risk factors varied among the participants, with some facing a magnitude of serious issues while others lived more stable lives with fewer concerns, the participants' vulnerability was generally not linked to one single risk factor, but rather to several intersecting issues and complex life circumstances.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using selected aspects of constructivist grounded theory procedures (Charmaz, 2006). Categories were established as they emerged from the data through initial line-by-line coding of all data (open coding), after which categories were grouped into more abstract themes (axial coding). Categories that appeared to be of greatest relevance to the developing analysis were identified as the analysis progressed (selective coding). Extensive memo-writing on participants and themes were used to elaborate categories and define relationships between categories. This led to the identification and description of a range of program happenings and events as well as patterns in the participants' perspectives. To support the rigour of our study, our analysis was discussed with volunteers and staff of youth organisations and presented for feedback to an expert committee including young people, key stakeholders and external youth scholars.

Ethics

This study was approved by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. All workshop participants were informed about the research and all interview and focus group respondents gave written consent to participate in the study. To protect the identities of the participants, all names in the data presentation have been replaced with pseudonyms and potentially identifying details from the participants' narratives have been altered or omitted.

Key elements of the Youth Insearch model

Recovering from trauma and adverse childhood experiences is in many cases a lifelong journey which does not take place in isolation, but rather is contingent upon the young person forming new social connections (Perry, 2007). However, disadvantaged young people are likely to be disconnected from traditional forms of support and social institutions such as family, education, or other pro-social forms of social capital (Heinze, Jozefowicz, & Toro, 2010), making fragile relationships and weak social networks a key challenge for young people facing disadvantage (Curran, Bowness, & Comack, 2010; Iwasaki, 2016). Peer groups and relationships may then be especially important for such young people due to the limited availability of other key relationships and attachments (Sanders, Munford, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2017).

Inquiry into the key elements of the Youth Insearch model revealed three overarching strengths or productive conditions, which appear to support the effectiveness of the program, and subsequently the change possible for participants. These are: Foregrounding young people's strengths and wishes; utilising peers as change agents; and transforming young people's environments. These will be described below.

Foregrounding young people's strengths and wishes

Youth work is different from school, social services, juvenile justice, and other statutory services that intervene in young people's lives, in its insistence on centring young people's views and experiences (Sercombe, 2010). Youth Insearch's intervention begins with the young people themselves and is founded on common goals and mutual understanding, anchored by the needs and agendas of the young people. Taking account of and adapting to young people's realities, priorities and circumstances were felt to increase the likelihood that the engagement would be meaningful and relevant, a finding supported in the literature (Tolan, Ross, Arkin, Godine, & Clark, 2016). Consequently, the participating workers and Youth Leaders all employed broad criteria for their understanding of successful outcomes. Most articulated a focus on enabling young people to thrive in life and emphasised nurturing the potentialities of young people rather than merely addressing their current challenges. As Joanna, a staff member describes:

A successful outcome is going to vary for every person though. It depends on what they're wanting to get out of it. If they're wanting to go just to learn strategies to deal with their own mental health, and they do that, then that's successful. They don't self-harm anymore, they don't have suicidal ideation anymore, then that's successful. I guess that would depend on each individual as to what they wanted to get out of it. They're all going to go for their own journeys and their own reasons and, you know, we might have a shared experience with other people (...). So that success would be very different, depends on what they want to take away from it and what they want to do with what they learn from it. Like if they're doing what they want, then that's a success. (Joanna, staff member)

Being responsive to the individual young person's priorities and concerns was further mentioned by participating workers and Youth Leaders as a vital step in building relationships with young people. This meant highlighting elements of trust, support and respect for the wishes of the young person.

The respectful approach also involved recognising that although young people face significant challenges, they also have unique capacities, competencies and resilience, as well as resources that can be utilised to good effect, through the peer-support model.

Utilising peers as change agents through peer-support

The cornerstone of Youth Insearch is peer-support, which in this context is based on the normalising and inspiring effects of recognising one's own concerns and needs in another person's shared situation. The findings suggest that new relationships, in particular with peers and Youth Leaders, were crucial for participants because they permitted the introduction of new knowledge, opportunities and resources as well as role-modelled diverse ways of being and behaving. Participants expressed feeling enabled to grow their confidence, build strong identities and be supported in distancing themselves from self-defeating beliefs and behaviours through the support of peers in the program. Young people seemed especially well-positioned to confront other young people's negative self-understandings and unhealthy coping strategies and push them to change. This is illustrated in the case of Layla who had been subjected to long-term peer victimisation and bullying and had started to self-harm. Layla described an instance where a Youth Leader at the program saw through her 'mask' and challenged her to be more honest with herself about her feelings.

I was so negative and down on myself. I held everything in. I'd been self-harming for a year and a half when I got to the program, and none of my friends noticed. Like, they knew people were bullying me, but they didn't really think it was affecting me. And then I started going on programs and then felt these people were, they actually cared enough to ask me about it and want to help. I was just so used to no one noticing. Sometimes there'd be the odd occasional "are you doing alright?", and I could act like there was nothing wrong, and they bought it. And then on program, I tried to do that with one of the Leaders and he just looked at me and goes; "that's bullshit and you and I both know it, you're not okay". And I was like "holy shit, he's actually noticing there's stuff wrong". I was like angry, but like relieved. I put so much effort into putting up this perfect there's nothing wrong facade. (Layla, program participant)

Being thus noticed by a peer allowed Layla to experience herself as worthy of care. Peers appeared able to both challenge and encourage without disregarding the young person's autonomy. It is unlikely that an adult professional could have spoken to Layla in a similarly blunt and direct way – or that Layla would have accepted such confrontational talk from an adult. There were numerous examples where supportive peers were able to create spaces where participants could safely and consciously let go of self-defeating or constricting roles and behaviours.

Youth Leaders described how they were able to draw from their own experiences of adversity to build an empathetic connection with their peers. Such support was especially helpful when the Youth Leaders had achieved a level of competence, self-acceptance and personal development where positive and challenging past experiences could be shared and embraced. This created credibility, as experiences and knowledge were embedded in real-life situations directly relevant to the lives of the other participants. As Youth Leaders shared their stories, they showed that change was achievable even for people who confront significant adversity. As Alex, a Youth Leaders detailed:

*The Leaders, that are on the programs, have come through the programs as young people themselves that had their own issues that they were able to move past, and then be ready to help others do the same. So I think once they see that the people in the room that are running the sessions, helping them, and I guess, leading those conversations, they are told from the beginning that these people once sat where you sat and felt the same feelings and went through the same things. So, I guess that gives them a level of credibility and they're instantly more accepted because they're like, 'Oh wow, they're not just people that they hired or are just going to boss us around', like, 'They know what we know, know the pain we feel'.
(Alex, Youth Leaders)*

Peers were especially seen as able to role model alternatives, as peers often had to overcome similar or relatable challenges allowing them to offer genuine understanding of the young person's worldview, circumstances and concerns. Participants described previous experiences where adult professionals' superficial understandings of their circumstances had led to meaningless encouragement towards behavioural change that took account of neither their wishes nor the difficulties they were facing. Receiving empathy and advice from Youth Leaders and other participants further down the path in coping and dealing with similar issues was considered more useful and applicable.

Transforming young people's environments on weekend workshops

Where a vast majority of the participating young people mentioned that the weekend workshops had been both confronting and challenging, and for many continued to be so, many stated that the presence of peers and adults provided the required support enabling them to succeed in the program. The participants described how peers provided positive reinforcement and actively coached them to continue making changes in their lives and working on achieving their goals. Overall, the participants were overwhelmingly positive about the programs and the weekend workshops, describing these as 'life changing' and a fresh start.

Peer-led workshops differ from activities run by adults. The less controlled and controllable environmental and group dynamics and the unpredictability of the sharing of mutual experiences creates spaces rich with opportunities for learning and developing life skills and capabilities.

It changes you. It honestly changes a person. And that is why every time I go to a camp, I love meeting all of the people again, because you see the change. Not just like what they look like, or what's in their eyes, but you can see it in their heart, and the way they walk around, the way they present themselves, completely changes. Body language, everything like that. Being able to get involved in the activities as well. Like entertainment night, that takes a lot of courage. (Lea, program participant)

Participants described frequently feeling overwhelmed, vulnerable and exposed on weekend workshops, which appeared to create an openness towards the new environment. The personal and social demands of weekend workshops were described as both mysterious and 'in your face', providing little room for self-protective masks or pretension. Often newer participants responded to these personally challenging and sometimes perplexing demands by feeling less secure and competent, pushing them into relying on the other participants for guidance. Consequently,

participants discussed entering a new and unknown environment and not being able to fall back upon habitual patterns of being and behaving, such as the one's utilised in school or within friendship groups.

Every time I go, I find it helpful. Before I even started going to camp, I was a bad kid, so to say. Like staying up late at night, going and having cones [using drugs] with my friends and that sort of shit. Breaking into places, stealing shit and all that. Then once I went to the camp, it helped me out a lot to see that there's other people going through what I'm going through and they can understand me. That's why I kept going to the camp. Even if I didn't want to go to camp, I'd force myself to go because I know it helps. Before camp it was just crazy, crazy. I was pretty depressed, I got mad anxiety, I was like cutting shit into my hands and all that sort of shit. It was mental. Now I know, I'm not the only one. (Brian, participant)

Safety and trust were identified as key elements required for participants to let down their guard and be open to the new rules of engagement. Safety and trust were simple and profound dynamics to establish. The ingredients that supported this included the use of play, connection, nurturing moments, sharing of stories of pain and triumph where 'people like me' successfully overcome challenges.

Domains of change

More than simply gaining assistance with obvious issues such as bullying or substance use, participants spoke about wide-ranging changes to their lives and the way they experienced themselves and their future possibilities. The ethnographic fieldwork enabled us as researchers to describe five broad 'domains' of change arrived at by comparing the participants' stories with literature in the field, in particular using the theoretical framework of Positive Youth Development (Heckhausen, 2007; Lerner et al., 2005; Silbereisen & Lerner, 2007). These domains represent broad areas of change, which build upon each other; that is change in one domain enables change in a subsequent domain. However, the domains are rarely discrete, and change is not a linear process; what impacts or benefits might accrue from participation in Youth Insearch often sits across several inter-related domains. The domains are:

1. CONNECTION: Enhancing wellbeing through connections with peers and adults
2. COMPETENCE: Increased self-esteem and sense of efficacy
3. CAPABILITIES: Strengthening capacities and dispositions for learning
4. AGENCY: Encouraging agency and supporting independence
5. IDENTITY: (Re)inventing identity through supportive practices

Below each domain of change is described in turn, and illustrated by participants' stories and comments, which provide evidence for change based on their own lived experience. Then follows the productive conditions we have been able to identify for change to be enacted and sustained.

Connection: Enhancing wellbeing through connections with peers and adults

Introduction

The domain of connections relates to the psychosocial processes involved in enhancing friendships, social networks and a sense of belonging. The literature shows that having mutually beneficial relationships with peers, adults and institutions in one's social world, can strengthen resilience and help people develop positive identities and social competence (Heinze, 2013). Supportive relationships can also assist young people to build connections and take up opportunities (Schofield & Beek, 2009). These relationships have been found to be most beneficial when they are regular, enduring and reciprocal (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004). However, young people in vulnerable life situations often lack exactly these types of social networks and supportive relationships which may facilitate positive life transitions (Bengtsson & Mølholt, 2018), and many suffer significant emotional distress due to bullying and social exclusion (Cowie, 2011; Sanders et al., 2017). Deep distrust of adults and services and fear of telling the truth directly hinders young people's ability to benefit from informal and mainstream support services (Barker, 2014). Facilitating access to such positive relationships with adults and peers may be crucial for disadvantaged young people's life trajectories (Meltzer & Saunders, 2020; Ramey, Lawford, Rose-Krasnor, Freeman, & Lanctot, 2018). Change in the domain of connections refers to being able to access and allow support; feeling connected to others; enhanced psychosocial health; increases in social skills; the capacity for friendships; and the ability to feel safe, less alone, accepted and validated.

Connection, cohesion and mutual support

A central component of the program involved young people sharing their stories in a large group format giving rise to celebrations of success and the chance for other program participants and Youth Leaders to offer guidance and advice. Young people sharing their stories of struggles with drug use, arguments with parents, or coping with homelessness provided opportunities to explore complex situations from the perspectives of the young person, to witness support, safety and vulnerability in vivo and to learn to cope. Study participants described that the support, care and encouragement offered by peers allowed them to build up much needed resilience and created support systems for their own self-care. The element of sharing and listening to the stories of others also facilitated a sense of 'going through a journey together' (Alma, program participant). This can be exemplified in the case of Brad who had been attending the program for 18 months and at the time of the interview was homeless. Brad explained that the realisation that he was one among many with similar histories of families divided by drug use, helped to normalise his experience and allowed him to feel less alone.

Before I went to program, I had no one to talk to, I always kept to myself. I always thought it was only me going through shit. Then going to program, I actually got an understanding of how many people go through the same fucking thing as me. It's cool because you meet someone, and then you find out what they've gone through, how it's affected them and it's affected you and it's the same thing pretty much. And then you can connect in a whole another level, you can actually talk to each other, be there for each other because you know exactly what one another have gone through. (Brad, program participant)

By listening to others in the group and seeing parts of their own story in the stories of others, the participants realised that they may not be as alone as they feel. Where Brad in the quote above

previously described not being able to relate to his peers, the realisation that he was one among many with similar histories both allowed him to place his story within a broader context and helped to normalise his experience. Peer-support helped Brad make sense of the world and his place within it by providing relatability, similarity and support from someone who ‘understands’.

In light of the magnitude of bullying in most of the participants' narratives, the fact that they now experienced safe and supportive relationships with others often created a substantial shift in their personal circumstances. The program in this regard helped many to feel safe in groups of peers and taught them to socialise in positive ways. Erin, a 17-year-old woman described how the encouragement to share her feelings, and seeing others doing so safely and without repercussions, made it gradually more acceptable for her to reach out for support:

Normally at home, if we show emotion, like if we start crying or something, we'll get told to toughen up or 'you're a little princess'. We'd get real hammered about it so we'd never show emotions in front of our parents or anyone. But at program they're like 'it's okay to cry'. I'm like 'no, it's not, not in front of people, you just don't do that' and they made me realise, it's okay to show a bit of heart. It's still hard for me to reach out for support. (...) But if you don't reach out and seek that support, how are you supposed to get everything off your chest? It's a big load to carry around when you don't open up. I know from experience bottling stuff up is not healthy. So, reaching out for support is so important. (Erin, program participant)

The participants in this study often reported extensive histories of victimization often resulting in enduring social isolation and loneliness. However, by participating in the program a majority of participants experienced a shift from feeling socially isolated to feeling connected to others. As such, participating in Youth Insearch begins to provide solutions, or at least partial solutions, to the participants' sense of loneliness and displacement. Moreover, many described an increased sense of happiness, enjoyment, excitement, enthusiasm, belonging, and empowerment as a direct consequence of participating in the program.

Summary

A key outcome of participating in Youth Insearch was the recreation of relationships and increased social integration. The findings indicate that participants developed psychologically as they interacted in the social environment of the program. Many moved from experiences of disconnection to reconnection, by expanding their network of friends and acquaintances, creating enriching and deeply positive peer relationships, all of which increased their psychosocial health and wellbeing. Apart from breaking what was in some cases a lifetime of alienation, the support and relationships available at the program also helped socialise the participants into accepting help. For this group of young people, who for the most part reported experiences of being denied support or receiving inappropriate assistance from the people in their environment, normalising needing and asking for assistance may have profound advantages for them now and in the future. Feeling connected and normalising help-seeking behaviour have been shown to act as vital protective features for young people with fragile networks and limited resources to draw on (Buck, Lawrence, & Ragonese, 2017).

Confidence: Increasing self-esteem and a sense of efficacy

Introduction

Confidence can be defined as an internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy. Young people who have been exploited, neglected or abused describe feeling unheard, unimportant, and worthless, and they often lack confidence that services and individuals in their world will respond appropriately and caringly to them (Beckett et al., 2013). The domain of confidence relates to developing self-esteem, wellbeing and perceptions of self-worth. A fundamental aspect of Youth Insearch involved stimulating young people to rebuild confidence in themselves through supporting youth voices and recognising young people's skills and strengths. In this, the work has a good fit with Positive Youth Development practices because both believe that confidence is built by encouraging young people to take safe risks (Sanders et al., 2015). Impact in this domain involves participants moving from self-limiting or self-compromising thinking and behaviours to self-enhancing and self-affirming ones. This also involves young people gaining the confidence that, if they encounter challenges and failures along the way, they now have the skills and understanding to navigate the difficulties without revisiting previous unhelpful coping strategies.

Realising your value and contribution

The group interactions at the weekend workshops and support groups offered opportunities to have fun, feel connected, improve social skills and feel 'normal'. Engagement in meaningful experiences, particularly activities that enable young people to interact with and feel connected to others, is believed to progressively grow competence by allowing people to develop through active engagement with their environment (Sorhaindo et al., 2016). Enabling confidence in this context involved supporting participants in their growing autonomy and providing opportunities for them to progressively exercise their unique skills and abilities without fear of judgement or ridicule.

Two of my year subjects were performance subjects, theatre and music, and both of them if I hadn't have gone on the program, even if I had have made it to year 12 without the program – and I really do not think I would have – but even if I had, I never would have done them which would have been really sad because I enjoyed them so much, but I never would have done them because I know I'd have to perform in front of people and if I was still like where I was and had such low self-esteem, I never would have been able to do it. And so, there's just like little things that don't seem like they matter, but when you really think about it, without the program you wouldn't have been able to do it. It's weird, just like the little impacts on your everyday life that you don't even think about, but like pretty much at least in some sort of way, everything I do in my life now relates back to the program. (Jeanine, Youth Leader)

Participants described undergoing tremendous personal growth and healing through the process of attending the program. The setup of young people, not just the Youth Leaders, offering advice and guidance involved participants not simply being recipients of support but instead encouraged all participants to contribute and support their peers. Significant change was identified as possible when the person being helped could engage in reciprocal relationships permitting a mutual flow of support. The study participants offered numerous examples where they or their peers, being positioned as 'experts', now rose to the occasion and offered considered, thoughtful and proactive assessments of the situation at hand and how to deal with it. Below is a quote from Nick who

reflected that the program had provided him with ‘something to strive for’, in this case, wanting to help others new to the program:

I do this for other people, and then in return I feel good about myself. I think there is an incredibly small group of people that I've met who haven't immediately been inspired to be firstly a part of the program, and secondly to do what the people on their first camp did for them. Your first camp is for you, and then once you go there, you're like "this is amazing", and then on your second camp I think you realise, "this isn't about me anymore, this is about the bigger picture, this is about everyone else's first camp". I feel so, so passionate about contributing to someone else's first camp. (Nick, program participant)

Nick detailed how the ethos of peer-support had created a culture of support at the program, whereby all young people looked out for each other's welfare. The experience of being able to soothe another's distress was personally empowering and allowed many to experience themselves as capable, useful and valuable. As Mary, a program participant who only recently started attending the program described “It gives you pride to know that hey, you helped them on their journey”. The participants described that Youth Insearch had created a pathway enabling them to use their knowledge and skills to the benefit of others. Simultaneous processes of needing support and advice while increasingly proposing change strategies for others, allowed the participants to expand their self-understanding and build their confidence. The personal development potential also involved increasing levels of self-awareness and ability to be open to others. Gradually, the young people got better at listening and being empathic and shifted into providing more of the type of support their peers needed. Evelyn, who has a history of being moved between foster homes and a significant trauma history discusses the realisation that her story placed her in a unique position to help another.

I remember there was a young girl that went on a camp. It was her first camp. And she was pretty emotional. And she was talking in the family session and everything that she said was like literally the exact same to what happened in my life, right down to she had to live with her grandparents and grandparents wouldn't let her talk to her biological parents. And then it was like she said I don't know what to do. And it was like hey, hang on a second, I know what to do because I've done it. And it's like you've built that connection with them because you've been through that. And you know what it's like and you know the hard work. So, you go from being a negative role model to being a positive role model. (Evelyn, Youth Leader)

Although the journey through the program undertaken by the participants was described as both challenging and rewarding, the increasing skill in helping others was experienced as at least as useful as the personal rewards, and many relayed the confidence and sense of pride this created.

Summary

The findings suggest that through their involvement with Youth Insearch participants were able to move from self-limiting and self-compromising thinking and behaviours to self-enhancing and self-affirming ones. Challenging young people's sense of being unworthy could in most cases only take place after relationships of trust were built between a young person and another person in the

program. In particular, the centrality of reciprocal peer-support allowed many participants to gradually reposition themselves as survivors and experts, not purely victims of circumstances. Participants' ability to help others negotiate their challenging environments further engendered a sense of efficacy, value and self-worth and in this way contributed to their growing sense of confidence. Confidence was built from not only learning 'how' to do something, but from a belief that the doing would count, that is, that it was of value. Feeling of value, accepted and supported combined to build confidence and self-respect. In other words, Youth Insearch's practices created a context where confidence was not only an informing principle but purposefully enacted.

Capabilities: Strengthening capacities and disposition for learning

Introduction

The domain of capabilities refers to enhanced learning, resourcefulness, knowledge, life skills, strategies and tools for self-regulation. A person's capabilities indicate what they are actually able to be and do in life (Walker, 2006). Young people experiencing disadvantage have rarely been offered the opportunities to convert their resources into capabilities. Social institutions such as school and Youth programs are well placed to offer opportunities for such conversion of resources. Following on from the domain of confidence, participants described that Youth Insearch offered a safe, supported context where they could test their skills and ideas, cognisant of who they had become. Once new capabilities are developed, young people are more likely to find a willingness to re-engage in learning, social life and employment (Walker, 2006). In this, the development of capabilities can offer young people "a bridge from their disadvantaged experiences to a level playing field with their peers" (Wyatt & Oliver, 2016, p. 125). Change in this domain relates to increased capabilities, dispositions for learning, self-reflection, self-knowledge and ability to voice experiences of trauma. When young people can find words to express their feelings, the silence and secrecy surrounding the trauma, which previously restricted them, is broken. In its place, the focus can shift to the power that comes from young people's lived experiences.

Awareness and coping skills

A major impact of participating in the program highlighted by the young people involved learning about the consequences of trauma, sexual abuse, bullying, violence and parental substance misuse and being provided with strategies and tools to begin to cope with such adverse experiences. These group conversations taught them valuable information and raised awareness about how such challenges affect individuals and families.

I've learnt so much over the camp. I barely knew anything about sexual assault or drugs and alcohol, didn't know what those kinds of things could do or how it'd affect you. So like, yeah, it helped learning as well. (Anne, program participant)

The stories of the young people attest to a wide range of learning through Youth Insearch, from the acquisition of fundamental life skills such as improved communication, social skills, and in the case of young people becoming Leaders, public speaking, decision making, problem solving, organisational and planning skills, and so on. Participants described having gained an expanded repertoire of coping skills and strategies when things got difficult, which in many cases increased their ability to self-regulate and master their emotions.

I was able to listen to other people's stories about their parents being in the same situations that mine were, and broken families. We had sexual assault, so I was able to learn that I wasn't alone, and that I've – I don't think I've ever actually opened up on a camp, but I've been taking information and stories from other people to grown just myself, personally. And then we had grief the next morning. There was a lot of grief, from lost opportunities to people that I had lost, to loss of childhood – all that sort of stuff. And I didn't even know grief was anything other than just a loved one that's passed away. I didn't know that I was grieving, but this whole time, that was the emotion – that's what I was going through. And I never understood that. I was like, "I'm just mentally – there's just something mentally wrong with me." But I learnt that I wasn't alone, and that grief was multiple different things, and it was okay to feel those things. (Vicky, program participant)

Strengthening of capabilities relates to increasing young people's self-awareness and emotional coping skills by providing safe spaces for such dialogues to occur. In this sense, young people spoke of gaining knowledge, tools and encouragement at the weekend workshops, which in turn increased their willingness and capacity for learning. Freya, a Trainee Leader, described both the kinds of learning that take place at the weekend workshops and identified the particular contextual, relational, organisational and pedagogical conditions which enable it to take place.

I feel like giving the right resources, given the right tools, being around the right people leads to a positive, a more positive light. And I think that's what Youth Insearch does. It guides us and give us the tools. But there's no point giving someone a toolkit and being, "Here are the tools" and not telling them how to use them. Because it gives absolutely no impact whatsoever. Whereas Youth Insearch, it's hands-on. You do activities that get you out of your comfort zone. (Freya, participant)

Freya's testimony here alerts us to important attributes of learning in Youth Insearch, specifically learning as a social and applied practice. In the program, young people come together to understand themselves and the world with a view to improving it. They become active in the acquisition of knowledge to help themselves and support others. Such learning combined with the presence of an encouraging context, or a safe space, for reflective conversations, allowed many young people to feel comfortable to practice these new skills.

Summary

There is evidence that Youth Insearch assisted young people to build multi-dimensional capabilities such as life and social skills; capacities for friendship; educational capabilities; ability to participate in a group setting for learning; and ability to work with others to solve problems and tasks. Other skills acquired through the program included self-confidence and self-esteem; generosity and empathy; mentoring skills; aspirations and motivation; emotional safety and wellbeing; and for Leaders also public speaking, communication skills, and problem-solving and organisational skills. Aside from this, Youth Insearch created alternative spaces where young people had the opportunity to reengage in learning. That is to say, Youth Insearch provided the appropriate social environment where the participants felt safe to take learning risks and flourish.

For capabilities to be developed, young people need to be provided with opportunities to practise these capabilities. By contrast, pedagogies premised on subject knowledge and passive learning do not contribute to capabilities related to voice, aspiration or autonomy (Walker, 2006). The capabilities of voice, goal-setting and aspiration are something on which other capabilities can build, as they can be used to define and move towards other passions, life goals and plans for the future (dreams, needs and desires). In this way, Youth Insearch assisted young people to build the capabilities needed to pursue the kinds of imagined futures they want to move into. Such increases in the domain of capabilities in many cases increased dispositions for learning, enhanced employability and were fundamental for the following domains, namely, agency and identity.

Agency: Encouraging agency and supporting independence

Introduction

The analysis revealed an underlying outcome in the data, which can be described as the fostering of a sense of agency and independence. The domain of agency refers to being able to act upon the world, and increasingly being able to take control over one's life and direct it towards preferred destinations despite obstacles and challenges (Bryant & Ellard, 2015; Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2019). Change in this domain relates to young people's beliefs that they can make choices and decisions and take responsibility for the outcomes of such choices, as opposed to merely feeling powerless and reactive to circumstances. The findings indicate that agency is related to the above discussed domain capabilities, as enhanced self-awareness and tools for self-regulation combined with the provision of encouragement and support were prerequisites for increases in agency. With changes to the domain of confidence, participants often described feeling progressively more purposeful, capable, positive and motivated to pursue passions and interests they previously would have shied away from.

Respecting young people's autonomy, recognising their skills and knowledge

The lives of young people experiencing adversity often appear chaotic, with situations occurring over which they have little control, such as being removed into state care or suddenly cohabiting with mum's new boyfriend. This lack of control in their lives is often combined with a heightened sense of responsibility for concerns that their peers might not have to confront. For instance, many of the participants in this study spoke about having to take care of younger siblings when parents were intoxicated or using drugs, from soothing them when domestic violence occurred in the household to stealing food for dinner. Additionally, these young people often presented with a lifetime of being led down and disappointed by traditional social institutions and forms of support (such as family and school), which instilled a strong mistrust in people in positions of authority. Many of the participants discussed feeling angry at the world because adults had let them down. As an example, Tamara describes how a lifetime of having had to deal with very difficult circumstances and abuse meant that she presented to the world as an angry and volatile person, which regularly created interpersonal issues and conflict with institutions. She describes herself before she started attending the program as such:

I think I was more scared and more nervous than what I seemed. I came off as a very angry person. I was a very angry person, I will admit. I used to punch holes in

walls and I used to bash people for no reason. I was really naughty like that.
(Tamara, Youth Leader)

Many participants described similar stories of rage and a heightened desire to exercise some control and independence, often displayed in speaking up against figures of authority or disengaging from school. Although such acts of resistance were driven by an underlying desire to feel some kind of agency in their lives, or as a means to create and maintain a sense of identity, self-respect and recognition among their peers, the young people also spoke about the counterproductive and destructive effect of crime, drug use and violence. The necessity to take control and survive meant that many came to draw on skills and knowledge that, although pertinent to the conditions of their lives, simultaneously marginalised them further from mainstream society, because of the anti-social, stigmatised or illegal status of such actions. For Tamara, instead of being excluded from her first weekend workshop, she was met with an understanding and non-judgemental attitude by her peers. This stood in sharp contrast to what Tamara was used to, namely adults trying to encourage behavioural change without also demonstrating respect and recognition for how she came to be as she is. However, at camp she was also encouraged to take a different perspective on her life and her ability to make different decisions:

Everyone at camp were so understanding. And yeah, it was just really good. It was nice to know that someone was where we are. Like, where you were. And they knew the road that you were going to go down, compared to the road that they wanted you to go down. So, it was really good to get that encouragement to say, "Hey, hang on. Stop there. You're making your life out to be really bad, but if you start making other decisions, look at how bright your road could be."
(Tamara, Youth Leader)

By identifying with other people at the workshop who had similar stories, Tamara came to an awareness that although her behaviours amounted to hard-earned skills of survival and independence, they also had negative consequences, particularly for her future. The sharing of experiences with peers relating to drug use, self-harm or violence also meant that risks and risk mitigation could be jointly explored in a forum devoid of judgement and adverse consequences. This may be especially important for disadvantaged young people as safe spaces to discuss these matters and realistic strategies for a gradual reduction are hard to come by given the illegalities and stigma surrounding such issues.

Developing an expanded sense of possibilities was strengthened by Youth Leaders acting as positive role models. Below, Alison, a Youth Leader, discusses how she uses her personal history in her work with young people today. In particular, she draws on her journey from feeling helpless towards being able to model positive change for other young people.

I think sometimes, for me personally, I spent so long being helpless to my situation, that when I was able to take control of it and become a leader, I was able to help kids who were in that situation. I was able to be helpful. I had a purpose. Even though I wasn't able to change some of my situations, I was able to help other people and I was able to be there for them. (Alison, Youth Leader)

This element of strengthening the aspects in young people's lives they can take control of, or changing the ways they respond to challenges, while accepting that some aspects continue to be difficult, was repeated by many participants. As can be read in the quote, Alison discusses finding purpose and being able to assist others as components that strengthened her sense of self as a worthy person. It is this positive identity she seeks to support young people to attain. In practice, such counter-narratives of self-worth involved showing young people that they are worthy of respect, recognition and care despite problematic behaviours, while also challenging these behaviours by role modelling alternatives

Summary

In this domain of change, we saw evidence of impact through the reconfiguration of young people's sense of what was possible and what was doable. In Youth Insearch, participating young people were perceived by staff and adult volunteers as being agential, in that they were recognised as having the capacity to act and speak for themselves, as well as shape their own lives and the lives of others. As an example, peer support, advice and discussions were strongly encouraged and all young people regardless of length as participants in the program contributed actively to define and implement the norms in the setting. In contrast to adult-led youth services where young people are receiving a service, participants at Youth Insearch were active agents who not only contributed but largely defined how the program unfolded. Such gains in agency contributed to increased motivation and feelings of hope, independence, achievement and empowerment.

Agency is contingent on opportunity, learning, material and social resources. Key to understanding the necessity of encouraging agency for young people is the learned helplessness and sense of powerlessness and hopelessness often associated with lives lived in extreme adversity. Many such young people have experienced compressed childhoods and accelerated transitions to autonomy, often being required to take on adult responsibilities at a young age, while being denied the opportunities and support necessary to develop independence in age-appropriate ways (Rogers, 2011). Through the provision of practical and emotional support, advice and encouragement, participants described feeling confident and purposeful, and progressively being able to see themselves as authors of their own lives. Participants discussed the program as beneficial in this regard, as they were offered scaffolding to gradually exercise individual choice, freedom and intentionality and take (appropriate levels of) responsibility for feelings and behaviours.

Identity: (Re)inventing identity through supportive practices

Introduction

Disadvantaged young people have been found to experience continual rejection and failure by schools, often getting expelled, typecast as the 'problem', or viewed as despondent under-achievers in their dealings with adult professionals. Often this results in young people blaming themselves, and thus "engaging in self-silencing, rather than overtly criticising schooling and school processes" (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 410). This habitually becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, where young people come to see themselves in very negative ways. Changing the ways young people see themselves and who they identify with is therefore critical for provoking positive change. The domain of (re)inventing identity through supportive practices relates to countering young people's personal logic, providing positive role-models and supporting the development of narratives of self

worth. Impact evident in this domain correlates to participants developing alternative possibilities to think and behave and cultivating what can be labelled a positive identity.

Constructing productive lives and moving beyond the self-fulfilling prophecy

Many participants described how they were able to attain a more positive sense of self and meaning through such things as the provision of caring connections with others; a sense of belonging; recognition of strengths; and opportunities to contribute to others and their communities. Through genuine care for others and the experience of being cared for by others, healing, psychological growth and thriving were possible. And this, for many, expanded their sense of future possibilities:

It was confronting and it was hard to deal with but that's when I realised, I needed it the most, this is what's going to lead me up the right pathway instead of the wrong pathway 'cause if I didn't join the program I'd probably be doing mad drugs right now. I'm glad that I didn't take that pathway, I mean realising that other young people deal with the same stuff, it makes you feel better and because they're also around your age, you feel that they understand. (Sabrina, program participant)

This quote from a young woman, Sabrina, vividly illustrates the reality of the conditions many disadvantaged young people face: the necessity to make difficult and confronting changes to one's life, in the search for alternative future pathways. Like Sabrina, the majority of the young people in the study expressed a desire to be caring and contributing members of society. However, many did not know how to achieve this, and conveyed that they needed strategies and consistent and persistent support to develop the habits and follow the pathways which might enable them to realise these 'positive identities'. Before attending Youth Insearch, the majority of the young people had largely been left to navigate these pathways, and much of their lives, without much support. However, through supportive practice, many participants spoke of re-inventing themselves and constructing more positive identities. An example to illustrate this is the case of Charlotte, a 20-year-old woman who started attending the program when she was 14-years old and eventually became a Youth Leader herself. She described how the Youth Leaders' role modelling of alternative, more positive behavioural options became a major factor supporting her positive change. When Charlotte started attending the program, she saw herself as a 'misfit', not belonging or being welcome anywhere. For Charlotte, this changed when she met other people with whom she identified and experienced with them the ability to change. As she recalled about meeting the Youth Leaders:

They had so much confidence and big smiles and they were so helpful to everyone. If you weren't sure about something, they'd sit with you and they'd talk to you. They were just bright and happy and bubbly, and I loved that. At that point in life, I was down, and I was sad and gloomy, and I just didn't want that anymore. I loved the happy, bright things and that's what I saw in them. Confidence, like I was never confident. And then there's these people and they're teaching us that this is all stuff they can do, and it was stuff that they've been through. I was like, I want that. That's what I had in the back of my mind all the time that I look up to these people, they empowered me to keep going. (Charlotte, Youth Leaders)

Charlotte found different avenues of belonging by accessing a peer community that did not identify as 'misfits'. This allowed her to remove herself from her social networks and the associated practices

of crime, drug use and exchange economies. The environmental and relational ingredients that combined to make this change possible, relied on relational connection, mutuality and letting go of personal frameworks and fears of exclusion, which enabled her to develop a new self-narrative as competent, hopeful and happy.

Developing an expanded sense of possibilities was especially supported by Youth Leaders sharing their own stories and offering advice, hereby showing that change is achievable even for people who confront significant adversity. The fostering of hope is a powerful tool for promoting a sense of control over one's own life, as hope allows for alternative pathways and future possibilities to emerge. Below are three examples from participants who describe how participating in Youth Insearch expanded their aspirations and hopes for a better future:

I was going to drop out of school at the end of this year before I started Youth Insearch because of the stress and the bullying and my older sister with her brain mentality. And dad wanted to go back to work and that, so I was going to drop out to be able to help out with my older sister and crap like that. And coming to Youth Insearch, it's made me realise well, I want them goals. That's what I want. I can't just drop out, otherwise I'm not going to be able to go to university. I'm not going to be able to do child studies. (Sophie, participant)

My friend at the camp, he was telling me how he was on drugs and he was trying to quit and all that, at the camp before. And then when I went to this camp, he came up all excited and told me, "I quit. I've been clean for two weeks and a half" – and I was like, oh what the fuck. He was telling me it was hard, but I just stuck with it and all that and it got me through it. That really made me think about how I could do something to change that. So, I quit too. (Martin, participant)

At first camp I tried changing, but it wasn't good enough. Second camp really hit me, and I started changing quicker, I started fixing things up quicker, and then I was just getting more out of school. Ever since I started Youth Insearch I've just seen the brighter in everything. And it's great. I've actually never been this happy in god-knows how long. How much I've improved in myself and that I'm seeing the bright side of everything. (Jake, participant)

Summary

The findings suggest that participants were able to attain a more positive sense of self and sense of their future aspirations through participating in the program. The role modelling of alternative, more positive behavioural options was identified across all interviews as a major factor in supporting positive change for the participants. Many participants spoke about wanting to become better, kinder, more compassionate people as a direct consequence of attending the program. This related both to Youth Leaders encouraging positive values such as integrity, honesty, caring and compassion but just as much to the environment at the weekend workshops where such values are acted upon and promoted.

Youth programs can be understood as social spaces powerfully shaping the ways young people think about themselves and understand the opportunities available to them (Bryant, 2018). Within the social space created at Youth Insearch, kindness and helpfulness brought gains for the participants - they were highly valued attributes that carried currency with peers and assisted them to negotiate

the sometimes challenging individual and relational demands at the weekend workshops. In contrast, youth services mainly constructing young people as 'clients' in 'need of help' serve to maintain the ontological condition of deficit and disempowerment in their lives (Blanchet-Cohen & Bedeaux, 2014). When the logic of the program instead encourages kindness, change and altruism, as is the case with Youth Insearch, participants are able to challenge the deficit-narrative and develop self-understandings as capable, valuable and cared for. Such a model positions young people in a positive, empowered way in the service encounter, which helps many build positive identities and constructive lives.

By way of summary, there is evidence that Youth Insearch had positive impacts in terms of:

- Enrolling in further education and training courses.
- Developing employability skills.
- Attaining employment.
- Developing social networks and social structures enhancing future opportunities.
- Developing motivation, passion and drive.
- Building an entrepreneurial spirit.
- Realising personal potential, interests and capabilities.

Productive conditions

The following productive conditions were identified for achieving sustained change across the domains.

- Foregrounding young people's worlds and concerns
- Understanding the complexity of young lives
- Acknowledging the centrality of relationships for change to occur
- Developing opportunities for social networking, friendships and personal growth
- Developing a spirit of inclusiveness, respect, safety and belonging
- Creating friendly and welcoming spaces
- Providing interactive, engaging and socially worthwhile activities
- Expanding young people's sense of their possibilities and futures
- Reinventing individual and group identities by moving beyond pathologising practices
- Creating spaces for dialogue and sharing, self-reflection and self-awareness
- Respecting participants' ways of coping while encouraging alternative solutions
- Supporting emotional and relational risk taking
- Providing opportunities for capacity building
- Providing opportunities to feel purposeful, capable and confident
- Enabling a deepening engagement which results in a sense of achievement, enjoyment and pride
- Establishing challenging goals that extend all participants and make demands of them
- Providing support, mentoring and role-models
- Challenging deficit-thinking and moving beyond negative self-fulfilling prophecies
- Acknowledging the relational and social dimensions of learning
- Creating opportunities for meaningful participation across all levels of engagement
- Creating opportunities for recognition of skills and strengths

Recommendations and issues for consideration

Challenging aspects and suggestions for improvements were also identified. These pertain mainly to providing additional training for Leaders; enhancing processes of communication between Leaders and participants; updating the program at workshops; and developing processes for participant feedback and input.

Leaders

Many participants mentioned that they experienced the workshops as hierarchical, with a gap in power between Leaders and participants. It was felt that some Leaders did not handle this inequality well. Others raised questions as to the quality and skills of certain Leaders, highlighting the need for additional empathy and communication skills for Leaders.

Several Leaders raised concern over the collaborative environment between the Leaders, mentioning incidences of gossiping and cliques amongst the Leaders' group. Some Leaders did not feel comfortable sharing in the Leaders' group when they felt close to burnout and in need of support. Others discussed grievances that they had not shared with staff due to concerns over sharing in the group.

- **Enhanced communication** between Leaders and participants is suggested, so participants can better understand why things are done the way they are done and increase cooperation from participants.
- **Team building and a better environment between the Leaders.** Additional support for Leaders and yearly or half-yearly **one-on-one mentoring** with Leaders is suggested.
- **Heighten the quality of the Leaders' skills.** More accountability when instances of miscommunication occur is suggested. Some Leaders may lack the necessary empathy or are still dealing with significant personal issues despite graduating from the Leaders' training. The suggestion was made for a process where Leaders are not automatically graduated when their training is complete. This would involve setting up several categories of Leader roles, or an extended trainee period, where responsibilities for supporting participants and running sessions are more gradually increased once the required level of empathy, conflict handling and communication skills are demonstrated.
- **Different ways of participating:** The establishment of a type of Leader role focusing mainly on supporting participants was recommended. Some Leaders expressed a strong desire to give back and support others from behind the scenes but were less interested in running sessions.
- Additional training regarding **trauma-informed approaches**, empathic communication and holding space for a large group. Training on how to manage one's own emotions and stay in the facilitator or Leader role when triggered was also recommended.

Weekend workshops and sessions

A recurrent concern was the balance at the workshops between challenging or educational sessions and time for socialising and making friends. Sessions were often experienced as both overwhelming and confrontational, with little time for integration and self-regulation. The amount of sitting per day was also raised as a concern by both adults and young people. Many suggested that the format of sitting in a circle for most of the day could impede learning and outcomes for some participants, particularly those with challenges sitting and listening for extended periods. This format reminded many of school settings with which the majority had negative experiences. Others suggested that

participants might be acting up because they feel uncomfortable, confronted or unsafe. Furthermore, the repetitive nature of the workshops was mentioned by a vast majority of participants, along with the need to update the content of the sessions and add new activities and engaging exercises.

- A more **dialogic, trauma-informed approach** is recommended when young people are seen to 'misbehave' in sessions or at a weekend workshop.
- A better **balance between emotional and challenging sessions and social activities** is recommended. Considering the significance of cultivating friendships, connections and social skills, it is recommended that Youth Insearch allow more leisure time during the weekend workshops so that young people have time to create social connections with peers and adults as well as unwind and integrate after particularly emotional sessions.
- More physical activities and exercises in sessions where young people are encouraged to stand up and walk around. This may also improve self-regulation, integration and provide the participants with opportunities to ground and stay present.
- More **interactive sessions**. Breaking the large group up into smaller groups where possible is recommended, to create variety, get people up and moving, to break up cliques and allow participants the opportunity to share in smaller groups.
- **Better introduction and welcome to new participants**. It was suggested that a person be allocated to notice when new people arrive and ensure that they are welcomed properly.
- **More communication and sharing of ideas and ways to run the program across states**. Rotating Leaders and staff across states is suggested so staff and Leaders can learn from each other and take back new ideas.

Session specific suggestions

The need for **updated content and more movement and variety** was especially recommended for the sessions 'Trust', 'Communication' and 'Self-esteem'. Participants requested less sitting, renewed material, less script-like delivery, less repetition and more participatory exercises.

- A greater **variety of exercises and activities** to choose from in these sessions is recommended.
- The **Self-esteem session** was identified as valuable, but many felt the topic was dealt with too superficially. Updating this session was suggested, for instance, including newer psychological theories on how low self-esteem is developed and the ways it might manifest (such as self-harming, self-destructive behaviour, poor choice of romantic partner, etc.).

Opportunities for participant input

A repeated suggestion for improvement related to updating the workshop sessions and the delivery methods. Participants requested that sessions be more relevant to the concerns of young people and mentioned that there were limited opportunities for participants to offer suggestions or have input.

- **Not enough opportunity for participant feedback**. Although Leaders were seen to have input on the content, participants rarely experienced that they had opportunities to offer feedback and suggestions.

- **More responsiveness to the issues and concerns of young people.** To facilitate processes whereby participants could have input on the themes and session, the suggestion was made to establish a participant vote on issues to be dealt with.
- Sessions on romantic relationships, self-harm, online gaming addiction, bullying, depression or journaling were suggested. These could be incorporated into an extended 'Teen Scene' as a way to keep the program relevant and updated.

Recognition of volunteers

- The significant commitment of **volunteer adults** could be better recognised. The suggestion was made to offer tokens for people who have volunteered at numerous weekend workshops.

Additional suggestions

- Enhanced **linkage with other community organisations** offering complimentary services is recommended such as services for temporary accommodation, mental health services and local youth programs.
- **Caseworkers:** Case management of participants is suggested as a beneficial addition to Youth Insearch program.
- **Family involvement:** Support for and engagement with the families of the young people is recommended where possible considering the significant influence of the family on a young person's wellbeing.

Conclusion

The work Youth Insearch performs is complex and layered, with the impact of the work accruing over time and in multifarious ways. Successful program outcomes are interactions between place, context and person, as each person presents with a unique set of strengths and challenges. That is to say, there are many trajectories through Youth Insearch's program, and a variety of beneficial outcomes possible. These have been described above under the interrelated domains of change, which we have referred to as those of connection, confidence, capabilities, agency and identity. We have introduced the notion of productive conditions to describe the conditions under which such change may best be supported.

In contrast to more conventional youth services where the relationship between practitioners and the young person tends to be more narrowly focused on addressing their difficulties, such as drug use or school disengagement, Youth Insearch takes an ecological approach aimed more broadly at the flourishing of young people. This involves seeing young people not as passive recipients of services, but as equal partners and active participants in a change process. In particular, Youth Insearch aims to support the young person themselves to become agents of their own development. Such an approach to working with young people as engaged partners, which gives them voice and asserts their rights to be involved in transforming and recreating their own situation, creates opportunities that both extend the reach and deepen the impact of the program.

The findings suggest that Youth Insearch provided a protective point of connection, a sense of belonging and much needed access to services, peers and alternative social resources. Such a model supports a less structured person-centred approach, where those with lived experience mirror alternative pathways to healing, respect and self-empowerment. The findings further illuminate peers' ability to present different avenues of recognition, belonging and ways of being in the world to other young people. The sharing of one's own personal strengths and struggles devoid of a self-protective mask or pretension, enables the creation of new possibilities and hopes, despite past realities. Role modelling provided scaffolding for young people to gradually reposition themselves as survivors and experts, no longer victims of circumstances, a finding reiterated elsewhere (DuBois & Felner, 2016; Wyatt & Oliver, 2016). Interrupting the ways young people see themselves and who they identified with acted as powerful instigators for provoking positive change. Participants' ability to help others negotiate their challenges further engendered a sense of efficacy and self-worth and in this way contributed to their sense of agency. The dual phenomenon of being both the recipient of peer-support and the facilitator of change processes for others enhanced empowerment and agency and promoted positive youth outcomes.

In the context of measuring outcomes for young people experiencing high levels of individual and contextual risk factors, it is important to note that young people rarely present with a single issue for which there exists a single right solution. Rather, they might present to Youth Insearch needing support in coping with a whole range of issues and priorities, and while some might be addressed initially, others require long-term support (such as issues related to family instability or mental health). Additionally, as life continues to unfold, new issues might present, such as abusive intimate relationships or bullying for which young people will require support, advice and coping strategies. The preliminary analysis suggests that supporting young people experiencing disadvantage should not be viewed as a linear process, but rather as a continuing, mutual and reflective learning process of standing by a young person in the face of their hardship.

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